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ABSTRACT

Sibling conflicts are formative opportunities for children to learn constructive conflict strategies such as negotiation and compromise; however, they also provide a forum for learning destructive strategies such as verbal and physical aggression. This study explored mothers' perceptions about how frequent, serious, and typical sibling aggression is; parental responses to aggression, including intervention strategies and emotional response; and links between parental response strategies, parents' evaluations of these strategies, and the frequency of sibling aggression. Open-ended home interviews were conducted with 30 mothers who have one preschool-age child and at least one older sibling. Mothers estimated that sibling aggression occurred an average of several times per week and that it was usually "not serious." The mothers' most common emotional response was anger, and they used a variety of strategies toward the aggression, including discussion, separation, simple commands, and punishment. Mothers who described using more high- than low-power intervention reported more frequent sibling aggression; overall, mothers felt that calm discussion was most effective. They were also more optimistic that physical aggression rather than verbal aggression would decline over time. (Contains 12 references.) (Author/EV)

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Parental Beliefs Concerning Sibling Aggression at Home: Maternal Reports

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Abstract

The goals of the present study were: a) to explore how frequent, serious and typical mothers believe sibling aggression to be, b) to describe parental responses to aggression, including intervention strategies and emotional response, and c) to examine links between parental response strategies parents, their evaluations of these strategies and the frequency of sibling aggression. Open-ended home interviews were conducted with 30 mothers of one preschool-aged child and at least one older sibling. Mothers estimated sibling aggression occurred an average of several times per week. Mothers rated aggression as "not serious"; however, their most common emotional response was anger. Mothers described a variety of responses to sibling aggression, including discussion, separation, issuing simple commands and punishment. Overall, mothers felt calm discussion was most effective. Interestingly, mothers who reported using more high than low power intervention strategies reported more frequent sibling aggression. Mothers were more optimistic that physical aggression rather than verbal aggression would decline over time. Results were discussed in terms of parenting styles and the socialization of aggression.

Parental Beliefs Concerning Sibling Aggression at Home: Maternal Reports

Sibling conflicts are formative opportunities for children to learn constructive conflict strategies such as negotiation and compromise; however, they also provide a forum for learning destructive strategies, such as verbal and physical aggression. While sibling aggression is one of the most common forms of family violence (Straus & Gelles, 1990) little is currently known about the role parents play in deterring or promoting it (Patterson, 1986). Parents stated they would not ignore it (Rubin & Mills, 1990) but in an observational study Martin and Ross (1995) found parents responded to only 50% of their children's aggression. Clearly, more research is needed to understand the dynamics of parental involvement.

Social learning and social cognition theories suggest that frequent exposure to witnessing aggression is related to beliefs concerning how common or typical aggressive behaviour is (Eron, 1994). The first goal of the present study was to explore parental beliefs concerning the frequency and degree of aggression between siblings, as well as how typically parents believe aggression occurs among children. It was hypothesized that parents who reported witnessing aggressive behaviour between their children more often would also be more likely to rate aggression as typical behaviour for children.

Since parents are important socializing agents, the second goal was to investigate parental reports of their responses to aggression, including intervention strategies, the attribution of blame and emotional response. In addition, the strategies parents felt were most effective when dealing with aggressive sibling conflict were identified. The final goal was to determine if links existed between intervention strategies, evaluations of these strategies, and the frequency of sibling aggression.

Aims & Hypotheses

1] To explore how frequent, serious and typical mothers believe sibling aggression to be.

Hypothesis: The more frequently mothers report witnessing sibling aggression, the more typical mothers will rate aggressive behaviour.

2] To describe parental responses to aggression, including low and high power intervention strategies, the attribution of blame, parental emotional response and future expectations.

3] To examine links between parental intervention strategies, evaluation of their most effective strategy and the reported frequency of sibling aggression.

Hypothesis: Mothers who report a greater proportion of high than low power intervention strategies will also report more frequent sibling aggression.

Method

Subjects

Thirty families were contacted by letter through daycare centers and were paid $25.00 for their participation. The majority of families were Caucasian and middle class with two parents and an average of 2.7 children. Mothers were an average of 36 years old (SD=2.2; range 29-40), and had completed an average of 15 years of education (SD=2.96; range 9-21). Twenty-five mothers were employed in occupations outside the home ranging from cashier to accountant. Ten fathers participated in the interviews. Younger siblings were 53 months old on average (SD=5.7; range 39-62) and consisted of 17 girls and 13 boys; older siblings were 86 months old on average (SD=14.6; range 61-134) and consisted of 18 girls and 12 boys.

Maternal Interviews

Mothers were first asked a series of open-ended questions concerning how they responded to aggressive sibling conflicts. Two raters independently coded 66% of the interviews: inter-coder agreement on identification of maternal intervention strategies was 81%. Mothers described a total of 12 intervention strategies in total (kappa = .87): 8 low power strategies (discussion, apologies, separation, distraction, comforting, using reasoning and rules, guilt induction and refraining from intervention) and 4 high power strategies (punishment, yelling, simple commands, and threats). Mothers were also asked to identify who was most often to blame for sibling aggression (younger sibling, elder sibling, both or neither) and how they usually felt when aggression occurred.

Mothers were then asked to estimate how often physical and verbal aggression occurred between their children. Physical aggression was defined as intentional harm (e.g., kicking, hitting, biting, pulling hair, etc.) and verbal aggression was defined as intentionally hurting someone's feelings (e.g., using a derogatory name, teasing in an unrelenting or belittling fashion, threatening to harm, etc.). Frequency was estimated on a 5 point scale, ranging from (1) several times a day, (2) once a day, (3) several times a week, (4) once a week to (5) less than once a week. Seriousness was also estimated on a 5 point scale, ranging from (1) very serious to (5) very mild. Lastly, mothers rated how common they felt physical and verbal aggression were separately for both younger and older siblings on a 5 point scale ranging from (1) very common, (2) fairly common, (3) common, (4) fairly uncommon to (5) very uncommon.

Results

Frequency & Degree of Sibling Aggression

On average, mothers felt physical and verbal aggression by younger and elder siblings occurred several times per week. Mothers also reported aggression as "not serious" on average, for both younger and elder siblings. When asked how typical aggressive behaviour was, mothers rated both physical and verbal aggression as fairly common behaviours for preschoolers and school-aged children alike (for means see Table 1). To test the hypothesis that maternal beliefs concerning the typicalness of aggressive behaviour were related to the frequency of sibling aggression, correlations between mothers' ratings of these two measures were conducted. Ratings of the typicalness of physical aggression were not related to the frequency of aggression. However, ratings of the typicalness of verbal aggression for preschoolers were associated with the frequency of verbal aggression for younger ($r(28)=.39$, $p<.05$) and older ($r(28)=.36$, $p<.05$) siblings, as well as physical aggression for younger ($r(28)=.61$, $p<.05$) and older ($r(28)=.59$, $p<.05$) siblings. These ratings of verbal aggression for older children were related to the frequency of physical aggression for older ($r(28)=.39$, $p<.05$) siblings.

Parental Responses to Aggression: Intervention Strategies

Mothers reported a total of 8 low power intervention strategies and a total of 4 high power strategies (see Figure 1 for frequencies). Mothers identified calm discussion with both siblings as the best intervention strategy most often ($Z=1.72$, $p<.05$)(see Figure 2).

Parental Responses to Aggression: Attribution of Blame

Mothers attributed blame to both siblings when aggression occurred significantly more often than to either sibling alone ($Z=4.18$, $p<.05$) (see Figure 3).

Table 1

Frequency, Seriousness & Typicality of Sibling Aggression

	Mean Frequency	Mean Seriousness	Mean Typicalness
Physical Aggression			
Younger Sibling	3.40 (1.23)	3.16 (1.22)	2.57 (1.07)
Older Sibling	3.40 (1.41)	3.03 (1.18)	2.85 (1.04)
Verbal Aggression			
Younger Sibling	3.13 (1.34)	2.88 (1.07)	2.93 (1.05)
Older Sibling	3.03 (1.43)	3.34 (1.12)	2.64 (0.91)

N=30

Note: 1=most frequent/serious/typical & 5=least frequent/serious/typical; numbers in brackets are standard deviations.

Parental Responses to Aggression: Emotional Response

A significant majority of mothers reported they felt angry when sibling aggression occurred ($Z=2.71$, $p<.05$) (see Figure 4).

Future Expectations

In order to assess if mothers expected aggressive behaviour to change over time, a Chi-square analysis of type of aggression (verbal or physical) by type of change (increase or decrease) was conducted. Results indicated that mothers were more likely to expect physical aggression to decrease over time than verbal aggression ($\chi^2(2, N=30)=7.27$, $p<.02$)(see Figure 5).

Linking Intervention Strategies & the Frequency of Sibling Aggression

In order to test the hypothesis that parental intervention strategies were linked to the frequency of sibling aggression, a ratio of high to low power strategies was created for each mother. Higher ratios indicated more high power than low power strategies were reported. These ratios were then correlated with maternal ratings of the frequency of aggression. Results showed that mothers who reported more high power strategies also reported more frequent verbal aggression by younger ($r(30)=-.34$, $p<.06$) and older ($r(30)=-.42$, $p<.02$) siblings (rating scales were scored with 1=most frequent and 5=least frequent). The ratio of high to low power strategies was not related to the reported frequency of physical aggression.

Linking Best Intervention Strategy & the Frequency of Sibling Aggression

Prediction analyses assessed if reports of best intervention strategy (divided into 3 categories of low power, non-intervention and high power) and frequency of sibling aggression (divided into 2 categories of several times per week or more and once per week or less) were related. No significant association was found between the kind of strategy seen as "best" and the frequency of aggression.

Discussion

While parental beliefs concerning aggression have tended to focus on children's aggression with peers (e.g., Rubin & Mills, 1990) the present study made a significant contribution to the literature by examining parental beliefs concerning sibling aggression--a relatively common phenomenon in many families (Straus & Gelles, 1990). The more frequently mothers estimated sibling aggression to occur, the more typically they rated these behaviours for both preschoolers and school-aged children. Social learning theory suggests that witnessing aggression contributes to beliefs concerning the typicalness of aggressive behaviour generally (Eron, 1994). Observational research has demonstrated that sibling aggression is relatively frequent among preschool-aged siblings (Martin & Ross, 1995), yet little is known about individual differences in parental tolerance of physical and verbal aggression between their children. The next important research step is to determine if parents who believe aggressive behaviour to be more typical do indeed witness sibling aggression in the home more often, and if their beliefs are related to less frequent or less effective intervention in aggressive sibling conflict. Continued parental tolerance of sibling aggression over time may be an important factor influencing the development of aggression (Olweus, 1980). From another perspective, if aggressive behaviour becomes part of an effective pattern of behaviour for dealing with a sibling at home, it may carry over to other social contexts, such as with peers in daycare or kindergarten.

Overall, mothers felt calm discussion was the "best" strategy for dealing with aggressive sibling conflict. The question of whether mothers defined "best" as the strategy that calmed everyone down, repaired hurt feelings and/or prevented future aggression was not addressed in the present study but should be addressed in future research. While most mothers felt both siblings were to

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blame for aggressive behaviour, regardless of who was the perpetrator, most mothers reported feeling angry when aggression occurred. This supports past research in which parents reported anger in response to their children's aggressive behaviour (Rubin & Mills, 1990) and also supports the notion that affect plays a key role in parenting behaviour (Dix, 1992). Blaming both children and feeling angry also suggests that parents feel children should "know better" and be better able to prevent conflict, and particularly aggression, from occurring. To what causes parents attribute sibling conflict and aggression, and if parents feel siblings learn or benefit from conflicts with one another in any way may help us to better understand their responses to these behaviours (Goodnow & Collins, 1990).

Interestingly, mothers were more likely to expect physical rather than verbal aggression to decline over time. As expectations are one significant component of parental beliefs, goals, and behaviours (Hastings, 1995; Goodnow & Collins, 1990), future developmental research needs to address whether these expectations are fulfilled, and if they are related to the quality of sibling relationships and the development of coercive patterns of behaviour between siblings.

Mothers who reported more high than low power intervention strategies also reported more frequent sibling aggression. This finding supports the view that power assertive parenting behaviour is positively linked with sibling aggression (Larzelere, 1986; Boldizar, Khatri & Jones, 1991). It must be noted that mothers who reported more high than low power strategies also tended to report fewer strategies overall. The question of how parental beliefs and behaviour in response to sibling conflict and children's conflict management skills mutually influence one another over time, as well as the long term impact of sibling aggression in childhood (see Graham-Bermann, Cutler, Litzenberger & Schwartz, 1994) deserves further research attention.

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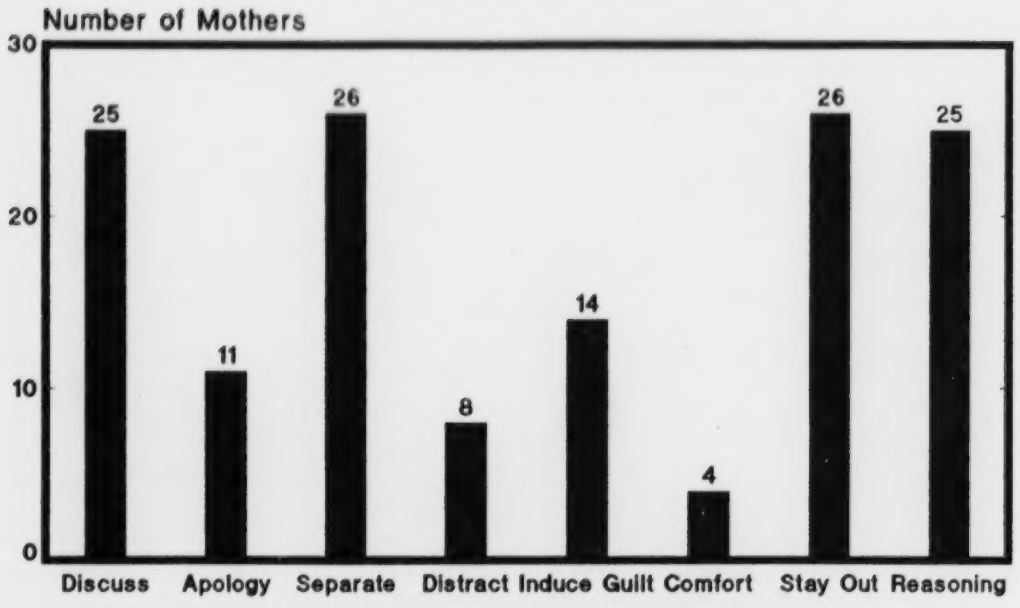
Figure 1

Low Power Intervention Strategies



High Power Intervention Strategies

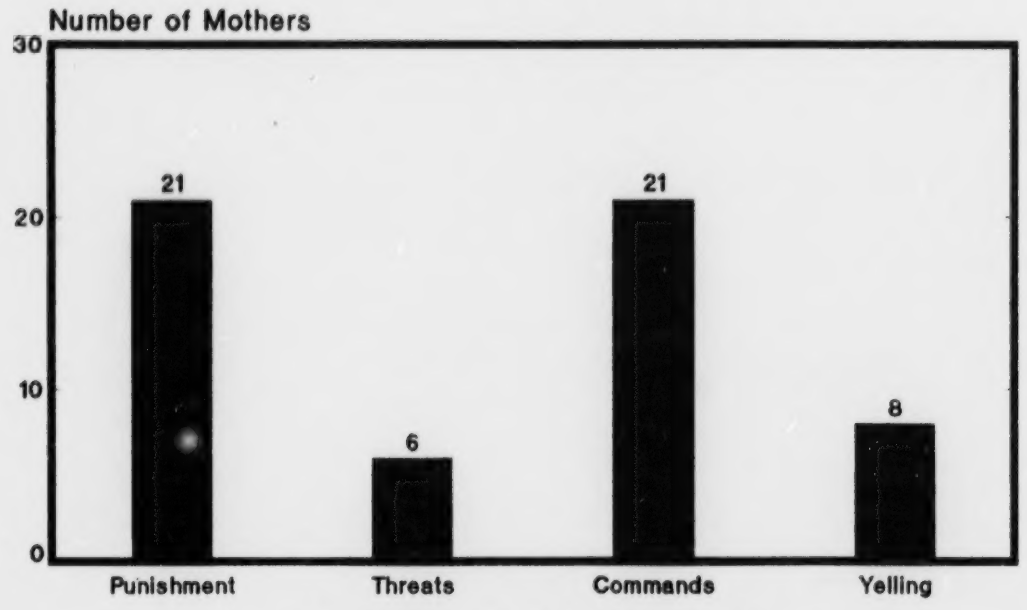


Figure 2

What Strategy Works Best?

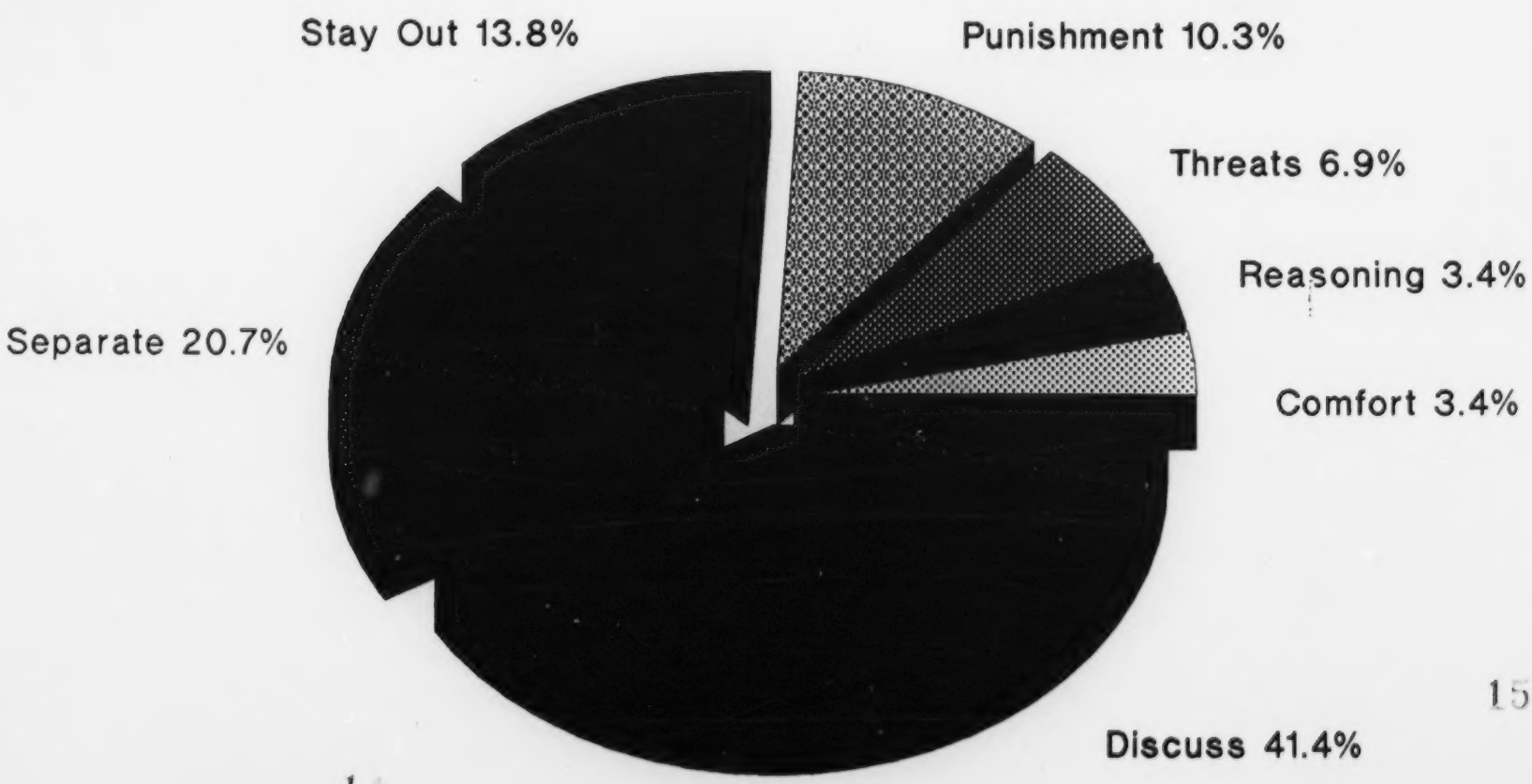
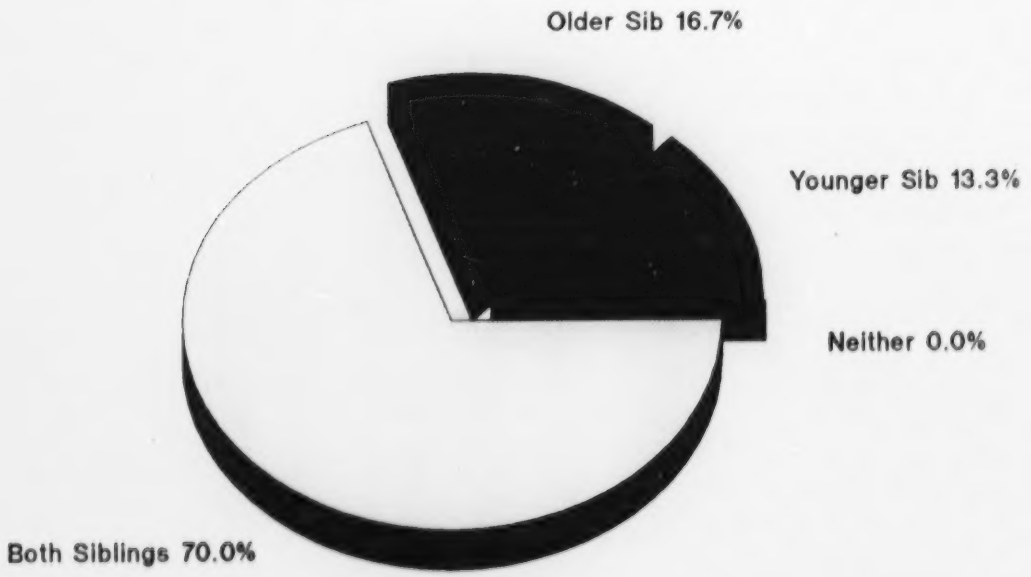


Figure 3

Who is Usually to Blame?



Who Usually Tattles?

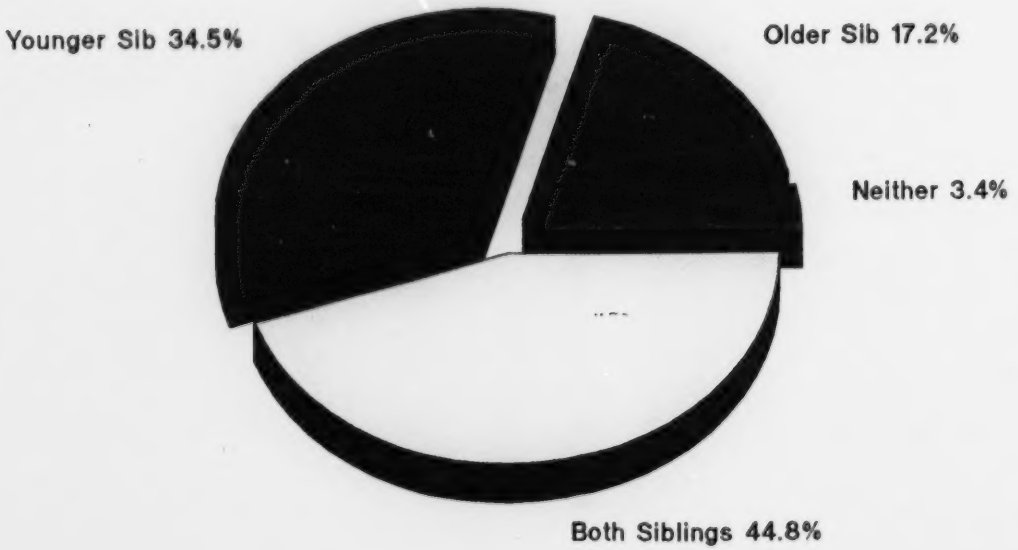


Figure 4

How Do You Feel When Siblings Are Aggressive?

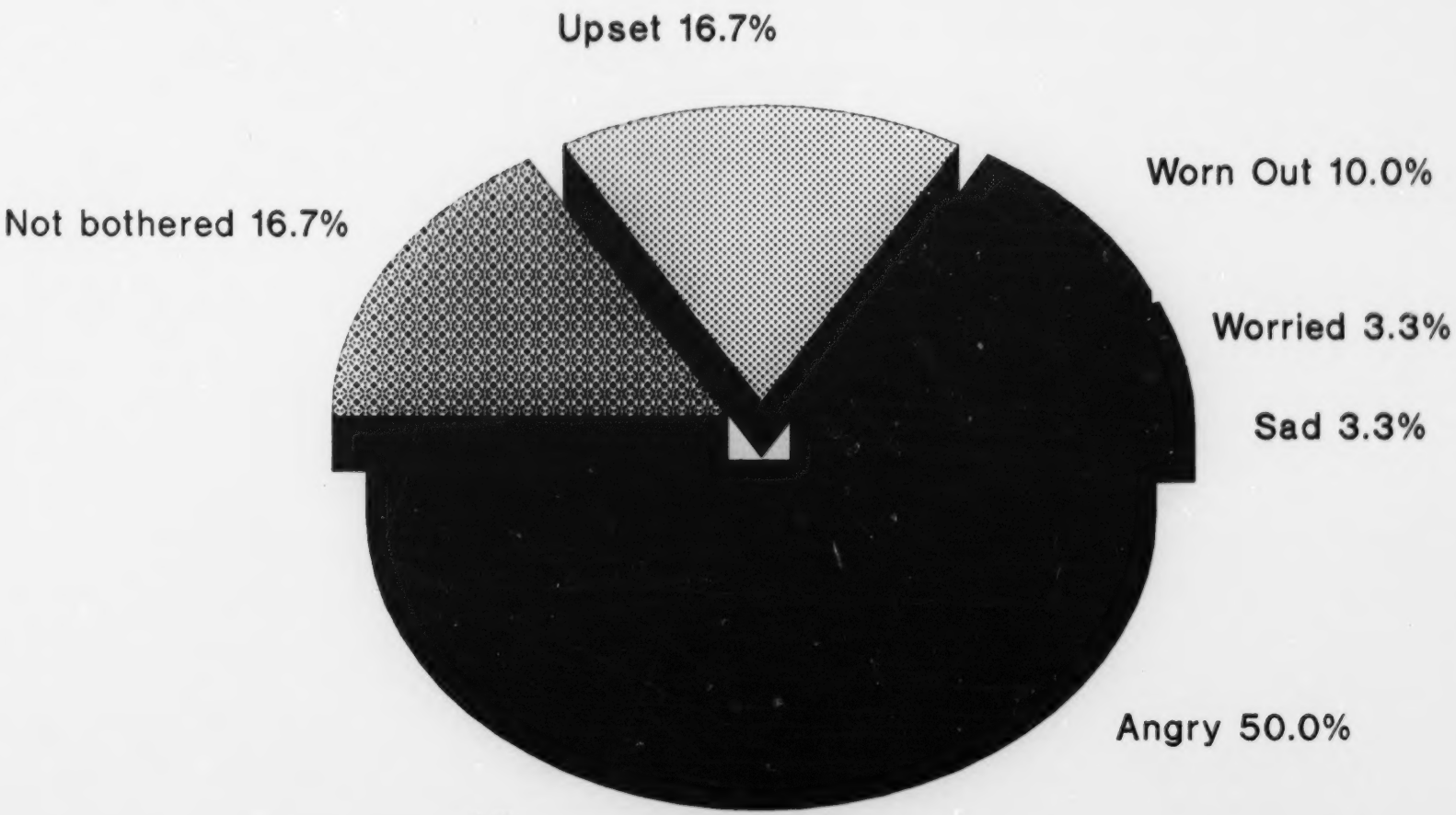
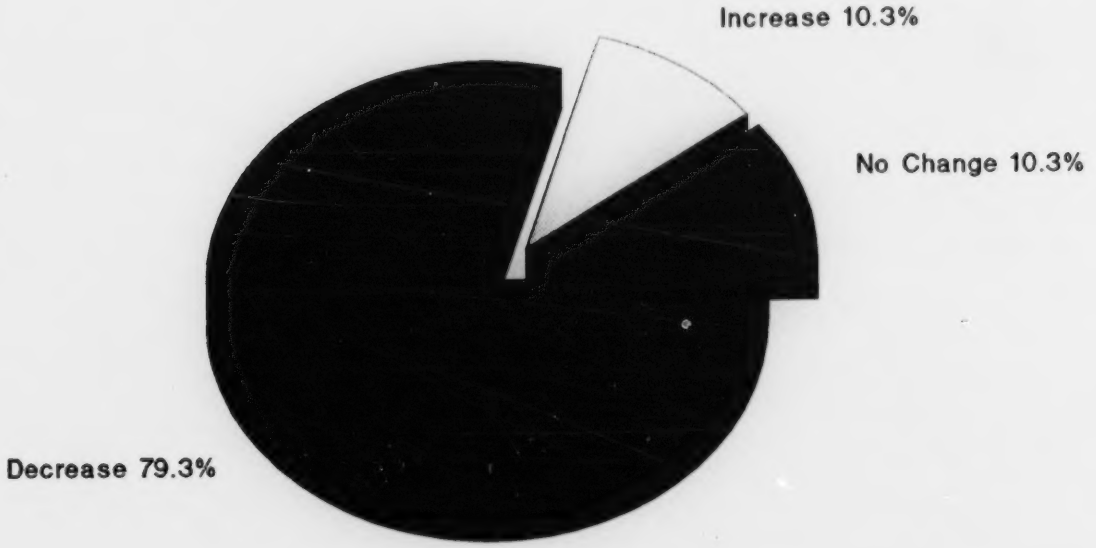


Figure 5

Will Physical Aggression Change Over Time?



Will Verbal Aggression Change Over Time?